

Petzel

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

Supporting Actor

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520 W 25th Street

If some 20th-century thinkers saw an exponentially alienated condition—a media spectacle and simulation state so pervasive that it severed any connection to the real—how would they fare in our AI-abetted landscape, where simulation technologies mix with virtual proxies and bots, emotional politics, and synthesized desires? Here, all that is solid melts into digital noise: iridescent flows, bodies and matter turned into signal and monetized extraction. Some would call this delirious state *biopolitics* perfected, regarding us as the human batteries driving this system. Yet, for Pieter Schoolwerth, this landscape offers a platform for nimble navigation, critique, and play.

Like much of his prior work, *Supporting Actor*—an immersive installation comprised of painting, CG animation, and sculpture spanning the whole of Petzel Gallery—takes up painting’s thorny engagement with technology while posing urgent questions regarding the status of the real in our moment of echo chambers and escapist apathy. A *mise en abyme* of spaces and objects, the show is anchored by a scale model in the South Gallery of a domestic bathroom turned on its side and opened like a book as the bathroom’s mirror reveals a tunnel to a small model of Petzel Gallery on the other side of the wall. Meanwhile, the CG-animated film *Supporting Actor* screens on a loop in a black box theater space in the West Gallery, offering a key to the show’s forking and interconnected paths.

Made in collaboration with artist Phil Vanderhyden, with a soundtrack by Aaron Dilloway, the debut film follows an animated avatar of Dilloway through a series of sets: a tiled bathroom, a club, and a third site akin to a studio or gallery. Our story begins in a familiar dream space, the bathroom, as the protagonist brushes his teeth and discovers the sound conjuring a series of anthropomorphic stains on the Celotex ceiling tiles. Suddenly, one stain above him opens a portal, welcoming him into a fantastical club. Equal parts *Star Wars* cantina and psychedelic cabaret, the luminous environment throbs with figures inventively drawn from the stain shapes as these farcical post-human creatures dance ecstatically to Dilloway’s soundtrack.

Meanwhile, Schoolwerth’s dynamic large trompe l’oeil tableaus revel in joyful hysteria, blurring authentic and simulated gesture that distends the human figure to question its privileged status within Western art history. Each becomes a sleight of hand: a pantomime of imaged flesh and brushstrokes rendered through a complex process. To execute the works, Schoolwerth first improvises small *Texture Tile* compositions inspired by the CG film. He then photographs these and extrudes the composition into a 3D relief model in CG software, into which he embeds the photographic fragments of the paintings. The file is then printed on canvas and rearticulated with a final hand-painted layer that, as Schoolwerth describes, “puts the paint back into the painting.”

If the original *Texture Tile* painting is thus lost in translation, transformed into its avatar, this complex process allegorizes painting’s uncertain contemporary state, where most works are viewed through screens as so many pixels, echoes—images once removed. Here, scale also plays a pivotal role, questioning the meaning of authentic gesture and expression in our digital milieu. When magnified 1000%, a delicate stroke applied with a thin brush in a *Texture Tile* work becomes an aggressive slash in its large, finished corollary: a caricature of Action painting, whose glaring inflation reflects the exposure of intimate information online.

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Such translation from private to public also mirrors the passage from the private world of the recreated bathroom to the model gallery space, as well as the shift from the private small canvases to the public larger tableaux in which the translated image is recontextualized—literally blown out of proportion. Between these registers, we find the film's Dilloway as he traverses a wormhole literalized in a passage from the bathroom to the miniature gallery—a channel transforming frail matter into luminous digital sublimation and our private inner lives into public performance.

Through such feints and proxies, *Supporting Actor* plunges us into a labyrinth of connections and regresses—an echo of the mirage in which we increasingly live via online doubles. Still, in a final stroke, Schoolwerth also offers a metaphorical base for this hypnotic superstructure via a handful of paintings on whose obverse hang relief sculptures of the very CG models through which the canvases were composed. Dubbed *Relief Routers* by the artist, these monochromatic works lead to a mixing board controlled by a 3D-printed model of Dilloway—a grimacing four-foot figure, part *Wizard of Oz* and part *Phantom of the Paradise*. Like us, he orchestrates the hallucinatory spectacle enveloping him, a space into which he willingly—joyfully—disappears.

—David Geers